

The Horror of Bigger Thomas: The Perception of Form without Face in Richard Wright's *Native Son*

Richard Wright's depiction of Bigger Thomas, a young African American whose social environment moves him to murder and rape, is meant to be both sympathetic and shocking. We, as readers, are to feel compassion for Bigger as he is caught up in economic and racial forces he can neither comprehend nor control, but we are also to be horrified at his retaliatory answer: the gaining of freedom and identity through brutally unfeeling acts of violence. At once we are both compelled and repelled by Bigger; he is both a lonely individual robbed of dignity and hope in a world where " 'you [as a black man] ain't a man no more' " (326), as well as a monstrous symbol of what could happen nation-wide if society refuses to make the American dream of freedom and opportunity open to all. As Wright later wrote in "How 'Bigger' Was Born," his protagonist looms "as a symbolic figure of American life, a figure who would hold within him the prophecy of our future" and "the outlines of action and feeling which we would encounter on a vast scale in the days to come" (xx-xxi). As such, this 1940 novel served as a disturbing wake-up call to a nation on the verge of the Civil Rights Movement (Rampersad i).

However, rather than focusing on the racial and economic forces that shape and provoke Bigger (a review of which can be found in Jerry Bryant's "The Violence of *Native Son*"), this study will instead examine what these forces have made of him and his relationships with others when combined with Bigger's own natural disposition. Specifically, Bigger Thomas, throughout most of the novel, is an individual who can no longer see or make connections with other people; as Robert Butler notes concerning the whole work, "In its most basic terms, *Native Son* dramatizes a bleak environment in which people touch each other only in violence, almost never in love or friendship" (15). Hence, instead of real communication and interaction with others, Bigger's world is one of stereotypes and mere surfaces as he categorizes other people (who have previously categorized him) in order to gain some semblance of control over his own life. Or, as Louis Tremain observes, "Bigger sees only what his fear allows him to see. Bigger's interactions with others are conditioned by his efforts to meet expectations by conforming to type. [And] . . . he can do this only by first typing those for whom he must play his various roles" (69).

Thus, for Bigger Thomas, a person whose "tangled duality has damaged him at the very center of his being" (Butler 14), the people of his life, both black and white, are no longer people but things: his mother someone to deceive and put off concerning his employment, his girlfriend Bessie someone to "use" (*Native Son*

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131) for sex and as a partner in crime, and white people another entity altogether:

To Bigger and his kind white people were not really people [at all]; they were a sort of great natural force, like a stormy sky looming overhead, or like a deep swirling river stretching suddenly at one's feet in the dark. As long as he and his black folks did not go beyond certain limits, there was no need to fear that white force. But whether they feared it or not, each and every day of their lives they lived with it . . . [and] acknowledged its reality . . . [and] paid mute tribute to it. (109)

In this sense, Bigger Thomas and "his kind" are as racist as anyone else, for their fear and anger blind them to the humanity and individuality of those around them, and especially of the white people, the tiny drops in that "deep swirling river." This is not to say that Bigger is to blame for this "fear of both himself and of others [that] is an obstacle to" real interaction and intimacy (Tremaine 66); as *Native Son* shows with shocking force, a society that denies one's individuality—that, in Bigger's words, won't "even let you feel what you want to feel" (327)—through economic and racial restraints must bear at least some of the responsibility for the "wheel of blood" that follows (362). But this lack or lessening of blame in no way alleviates the awful effects on Bigger (and on others, especially Mary and Bessie) of his racism. As Tremaine writes, "All of this typing, both of self and of others, takes its toll" by "continually" frustrating Bigger's longings "for genuine acceptance and understanding" (69), a frustration which finally explodes in violence as his only means for expression and control.

While the source of this frustration in Bigger Thomas has been discussed previously by critics (who have understood it as a "dissociated sensibility" that prevents the expression of "emotional experience" [Tremaine 64], on the one hand, and a "tangled duality" of Bigger's "romantic" and "naturalistic" selves [Butler 14], on the other),

what Bigger and his human interactions have actually become can be better understood by applying the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, a Jewish Lithuanian born in 1906 who was himself a prisoner during World War II (Hand 1-2). In his monumental ethical work, *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas describes the purest and most basic human relationship as the face-to-face encounter of the same and the other, in which the face or expression of the other breaks through its own limited form and speaks to me (the same) in a way that ultimately transcends any of my attempts to define, categorize, or totalize it for my own egocentric purposes. In this pure and even sacred encounter, the other refuses any reduction to a totality comprised of my own expectations and definitions, my feeble attempts to grasp his or her "otherness." Rather, the other standing before me remains "transcendent" to myself and "absolutely other," a being with an identity beyond the demands of any philosophical or organizing system of the same (39, 198).

This infinite aspect of the other, however, does not preclude a relationship with the same, for this is possible through what Levinas terms "language" or "conversation," in which "the same, . . . as a particular existent unique and autochthonous, leaves itself" in order to face the other (39). This facing of the other, in which the very "otherness" of that person breaks through in a "revelation: a coinciding of the expressed with him who expresses," is the purest and most ethical of all human interactions. It is the "privileged manifestation . . . of a face over and beyond form," a sublime experience in which "the face [itself] speaks" and its very expression "is already discourse" (66). Levinas argues further that, in this most basic metaphysical relationship, the face of the other ultimately demands respect and moral responsibility from the same, the person viewing the other's face in all its infinite nakedness and need. This

most moral plea from the other is described by Levinas as an "epiphany":

This gaze that supplicates and demands, that can supplicate only because it demands, deprived of everything because entitled to everything, and which one recognizes in giving[.] . . . this gaze is precisely the epiphany of the face as a face. The nakedness of the face is destituteness. To recognize the Other is to recognize a hunger. To recognize the Other is to give. But it is to give to the master, to the lord, to him whom one approaches as "You" [the "you" of majesty] in a dimension of height. (75)

The "demand" in this face-to-face encounter arises because an ethic of responsibility lies at the core of all human relations, an ethic which requires an obligation to the other from which we can never escape (Hand 1) and which turns the ordinary dynamic of slave/master on its head, for it is the vulnerable other who is really the "master." From the same's position of responsibility and from the other's position of both vulnerability and "height," the "presence of the Other" inevitably calls "into question . . . my joyous possession of the world" (*Totality* 75-76). And if I, the same, in turn recognize this questioning, this inherent moral responsibility found in the face-to-face relationship, then I am obligated to respond, for "to recognize the other is therefore to come to him [or her] across the world of possessed things, . . . [and] at the same time to establish, by gift, community and universality" (76). This is what Levinas describes as "the ultimate fact": the "relationship between the same and the other, [and] my welcoming of the other, . . . not as what one builds but as what one gives" (77). I have an inherent moral obligation, expressed in the face of the other, to respect and serve the other before me.

Totality and Infinity also describes those relationships that are *not* the purest or most ethical, and which often end in violence to the other. As Levinas notes, the separation between the same

and the other, while allowing a relation between the two through language (220), also allows an ignoring of the face as well, a "process of being that . . . remains separated and capable of shutting itself up against the very appeal that has aroused it" (216). Within this context of ignoring the face, or the infinite and unique essence of the other person, totalization (or categorization) of and violence toward the other often occurs, for the other is seen not as infinite but as a totality, a "thing" to be acted upon for the sole purposes of the same. This violence can consist of making others "play roles in which they no longer recognize themselves, making them betray not only commitments but their own substance, [and/or] making them carry out actions that will destroy every possibility for action" (21). Such violence has clearly been perpetrated against Bigger by his own repressive society, which demands that he play the role of the good black boy while at the same time leaving him powerless and without hope—as if "living in a jail" (*Native Son* 23).

Moreover, this violence can also aim to annihilate the other altogether, a seeming paradox in that, as Levinas notes, "violence bears upon only a being both graspable and escaping every hold" (223). For example, violence toward a rock is meaningless because of its finiteness, for violence demands both something that can be objectified and yet is beyond objectification, something inhuman as well as human. Still, despite this irrationality and the "moral resistance of the face to the violence of murder" (225), such perversions of human interaction occur, and thus the ethical command found in the face of the other, "Thou shalt not kill" (*Ethics* 89), is ignored in a "violence [that] can aim only at a face" (*Totality* 225) while simultaneously denying its humanity.

This perversion of the face-to-face relationship describes Bigger

Thomas's interactions with others throughout most of *Native Son* (perversions to which Bigger himself has been subjected, as his own humanity has been denied). As noted earlier, Bigger is so filled with fear and hate that he can only see people as types "for whom he must play various roles" (Tremaine 69). Concerning Mary and Bessie, the two women Bigger murders, his totalization of them as "things" to use or be used by is especially significant, for it enables him to dispose of Mary's body and to smash Bessie's head with little feeling of remorse or conscience; instead, he blames and categorizes them both as obstacles to his own plans for freedom and future happiness. After Mary Dalton's accidental death, Bigger reflects:

Hell, she *made* me do it! I couldn't help it! She should've known better! She should've left me alone, god-dammit! He did not feel sorry for Mary; she was not real to him, not a human being; he had not known her long or well enough for that. He felt that his murder of her was more than amply justified by the fear and shame she had made him feel. (108)

Later, Bigger reveals an awareness that Mary is more than a mere cause for his "fear and shame"; deep down he knows that these feelings have another source and that "Mary had [merely] served to set off his emotions" (108). But he still does not recognize her as "real," as a unique "human being." Rather, she is just one of the "many Marys" who have "conditioned" him to react with violence, a part of that "great natural force" that stands as his totalizing concept for "white people" as a whole (109).

Bigger's perception of his street-smart girlfriend is no better. Like Mary, Bessie Mears is never really an individual to Bigger, but merely a means of

sexual escape and a tool in extorting money from the Daltons, an object to use rather than a person to respect. This objectification of Bessie and complete denial of her humanity is seen most clearly in the rape scene preceding her murder, in which Bigger, "swept by a sudden gust of passion," is "conscious of nothing" but "what he want[s]"; "the loud demand of the tensity of his own body [i]s a voice that drown[s] out" Bessie's "urgent" pleas of "'don't don't don't Bigger.'" In this moment of violence, Bigger is still aware of Bessie's own desires for power over her "self" and her own "body"; he does feel "acutely sorry for her as he gallop[s] a frenzied horse down a steep hill in the face of a resisting wind" (219). But for Bigger, the "resisting wind" (as a per-

sonification of Bessie) is not enough to prevent him from forcing his will anyway. In the end, Bessie (like Mary) becomes merely an object to blame for his predicament, someone he can neither take with him in his flight nor leave behind, and hence the provocation of her murder. As Bigger sees it, "... it was her own fault. She had bothered him so much that he had had to tell her" about the murder (220), leaving him no choice but to kill her "to keep her from talking" (326). As with Mary Dalton, Bessie Mears has been reduced from a living, breathing, aspiring individual to an excuse and cause for Bigger's own pain.

Significantly, when Bigger Thomas kills these two women, he does so without seeing their faces: Mary's visage is covered by a pillow (oddly paralleling Othello's murder of Desdemona) as Bigger frantically tries to keep her silent (84-85), while Bessie's face is covered with darkness when Bigger smashes it with a brick (222). True, with Bessie's murder Bigger does

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turn on a flashlight to locate her face before striking, but then he "switch[es] it off again, [only] retaining as an image before his eyes her black face calm in deep sleep" (222). In neither case is the ethical imperative of the face, specifically its "moral resistance . . . to the violence of murder" (*Totality* 225), allowed to be given. Mary's only expression is her resisting body fighting for air, while Bessie's "calm" expression reigns supreme in Bigger's mind during the brutal act. Neither has the chance to express the most primal ethical command of the other, "Thou shalt not kill" (*Ethics* 89), a command which it is doubtful Bigger would have submitted to anyway, given his emotional state. Clearly this physical turning away from or covering of the face during these acts of violence stands as a metaphor for the large-scale perversions of Levinas's face-to-face relationship that fill both this novel and Wright's current social context.

Is there hope for Bigger as this novel progresses? By beginning to recognize and "develop a fuller, more substantial self which transcends the polarities and divisions which Bessie and Mary suggest," is Bigger able to start to "touch others" and "reach out to the world in love rather than violence," as Butler maintains (19-20)? Or, as Levinas would say, is Bigger starting to approach the other face-to-face rather than "obliquely" (*Totality* 70), or by ignoring it altogether (216)? Is he, by "welcoming" the other, starting the "exercise" of calling into question his own "freedom" and beginning, by so doing, to develop a "conscience" (100)? Such would seem to be the case, particularly in Book Three and the jailroom scene in which Jan Erlone, the communist sympathizer and boyfriend of Mary, openly reveals to Bigger his own pain and grief while confessing his responsibility in the murder—that Bigger had a "right" to hate him (and, by implication, Mary as well) because he " 'couldn't do anything else but

that' " given the social circumstances (267). Here Jan, in transcending his own grief for Mary's death and in knowing he " 'can't take upon . . . [himself] the blame for what one hundred million people have done' " (267), has decided to let go of his pain and reach out to Bigger. He implores, " 'Let me be on your side, Bigger. . . . I can fight this thing with you, just like you've started it. I can come from all of those white people and stand here with you' " (268). In essence, Jan is answering the supplication of the other to give, "to come to him [or her] across the world of possessed things . . . [and] to establish, by gift, community and universality" (*Totality* 76). Jan, for the first time, has begun to see the infinity of Bigger's being, as well as the inescapable ethical responsibility he owes to him.

And it is this turning of Jan's face to Bigger's—in a face-to-face relationship that manifests Jan's own vulnerability and transcendence—which begins the process of changing Bigger's perception of both himself and his world, and particularly of that white "natural force" that has always filled him with "feelings of shame and fear" (*Native Son* 109). Bigger's emotional response to Jan's proffered friendship is telling:

Was this a trap? He looked at Jan and saw a white face, but an honest face. This white man believed in him, and the moment he felt that belief he felt guilty again; but in a different sense now. Suddenly, this white man had come up to him, flung aside the curtain and walked into the room of his life. Jan had spoken a declaration of friendship that would make other white men hate him; a particle of white rock had detached itself from that looming mountain of white hate and had rolled down the slope, stopping still at his feet. The word had become flesh. For the first time in his life a white man became a human being to him; and the reality of Jan's humanity came in a stab of remorse: he had killed what this man loved and had hurt him. He saw Jan as though someone had performed an operation upon his eyes, or as though someone had

snatched a deforming mask from Jan's face. (268)

This face-to-face encounter between Jan and Bigger, so Levinasian in vocabulary and import—Bigger seeing not a “white face” now but “an honest face,” the “reality of Jan’s humanity” as if a “mask” had been “snatched” from his “face,” the “particle” detaching itself from the “looming” totality of “white hate,” the emergence of a conscience or “stab of remorse” in Bigger—marks the beginning of a fundamental change in Bigger Thomas’s perception of himself and others. From this point on, Bigger begins to see the interconnectedness of human beings: “He had lived and acted on the assumption that he was alone, and now he saw that he had not been. What he had done made others suffer” because “his family was a part of him, not only in blood, but in spirit” (277). And with this understanding of relationships and their consequences comes the desire to express himself and “make his feelings known,” “to reach out with his bare hands and carve from naked space the concrete, solid reasons why he had murdered” (323).

Such a “hunger for self-expression” (Tremaine 64), coupled with the hope of being understood, reveals the new world Bigger now envisions for himself and others, a world not based on iron “walls” (*Native Son* 14) of fear and hatred, but a world in which “white men and black men and all men” stand together in a “strong blinding sun” whose “rays melted away the many differences, the colors, the clothes, and drew what was common and good upward” toward it. This longing for a “union” and “identity” and “a wholeness which had been denied him all his life,” for communing with the other and feeling through the “stone walls . . . other hands connected with other hearts” and “to know that they were there and warm” (335), is made possible by the revelation (begun with Jan earlier) that “the white looming mountain of hate” was “not a mountain at all, but people, people like

himself, and like Jan.” It is this revelation of the face of the other in his former enemy—as he tries “to see himself in relation to other men, a thing he had always feared to try to do”—that allows Bigger to finally sympathize with others, to see that “he *too* would hate [because of his violent acts], if *he* were *they*, just as now *he* was hating *them*.” Bigger Thomas, to at least some extent, can now see beyond himself into the larger possibilities of communing with others without any regard to race, a prospect that fills him with a “hope the like of which he had never thought could be, and a despair the full depths of which he knew he could not stand to feel” (334). Such a vision finally leaves him wanting to live the life that his own blindness and fear and hate have denied him: “He wanted to live now . . . in order to find out . . . if [this ‘whole’ life] were true, and to feel it more deeply; and, if he had to die, to die within it.” But Bigger, in despair, admits that “there was no way now” with his coming execution; it is now “too late” (336).

The degree to which Bigger Thomas is finally able to relate to others in Levinas’s face-to-face relationship remains difficult to assess. Obviously a lifetime of living behind walls in order to protect himself and maintain some semblance of control is a rigid pattern to break; perhaps this “walled” Bigger is implied when the novel ends with Thomas smiling “a faint, wry, bitter smile” (392)—a sign that his faith in an ultimate wholeness of human experience and relation has been dashed by the “brutal irony” that “death comes at the threshold of . . . [this] most deeply human experience” (Butler 23). Louis Tremaine denies any final hope that Bigger is able to make “contact with others” by pointing to his “solipsistic acceptance of his own feelings” (75) when he exclaims to a horrified Max:

“But what I killed for, I *am*!
... What I killed for must’ve been
good! ... It must have been good!
When a man kills, it’s for something.

... I didn't know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for 'em. ... It's the truth, Mr. Max. I can say it now, 'cause I'm going to die. I know what I'm saying real good and I know how it sounds. But I'm all right. I feel all right when I look at it that way." (391-92)

Tremaine argues that "this final pathetic utterance, so triumphant in Bigger's mind, isolates him forever and leaves him clinging with a kind of desperate joy to the fear and hate that have destroyed his life" (75). Thus, in the end there is no connection for Bigger with the outside world, but only a distorted and twisted connection within himself concerning the rightness of what he did as the steel of his own imprisoned being clangs shut. If Tremaine is right, it is this monstrous Bigger who finds identity in violence and whose entire "life" has been "controlled . . . by his hatred and his fear" (Baldwin 22) that Max recoils from when he exclaims in horror, " 'Not that!' " (394). In the end, Bigger remains a terrifying reflection of his own dark society, a society marked by its inability to embrace the other and accept his or her humanity regardless of race.

To me, such a final dismissal of Bigger as little more than a "narcissistic" woman hater (Mootry 117-18) or the angry flip side of Uncle Tom (Baldwin 22) is both too harsh and too simplistic, especially given the ambiguity of this exchange with Max and, more importantly, Bigger's last three concerns before his execution. We need to remember, in light of Levinas's relation between the same and the other, that Bigger's last words are ones of concern and reaching out beyond his "self," and not of blame and "fear and hate" (Tremaine 75) as they are throughout most of the novel. Bigger's final messages are to his mother (" '... tell Ma I was all right and not to worry none, see? Tell her I was all right and wasn't crying none' "), to Max (" 'Mr. Max. . . . I'm all right. For real, I

am' "), and to Jan (" 'Mr. Max! . . . Tell . . . Tell Mister . . . Tell Jan hello' ") (392). The last of these messages, that to Jan Erlone—the man who by forgiving and siding with Bigger had enabled him to see "a white man" become "a human being . . . for the first time in his life" (268)—is the most significant of all, for not only is it Bigger's final attempt to connect with someone outside himself, but it also shows the range and depth of Bigger's change. Remember, this is the same liberal communist activist who initially grabs Bigger's hand and forces a closeness that engenders only "a dumb, cold, and inarticulate hate" in Bigger, who only wants to be rid of the consciousness "of his black skin" that such contact inspires (67-68). This relationship of complete disconnection has progressed to the point that Bigger can now, with his near last words, call Jan by his first name, deliberately addressing him both as a human being and as a personal friend.

The significance of this last attempt to connect—" 'Tell Jan hello' "—should not be discounted, despite the dark intonations of Bigger's previous affirmation that what he " 'killed for must've been good!' " (392), for while Bigger in all likelihood remains an emotionally disturbed person, he has learned something, and that something seems to be that people are more than types or things to use or attack or shield oneself from. Richard Wright's use of violence in *Native Son*, far from being gratuitous evidence of Bigger's dissolution, in effect allows us to measure this moral progress, for by the novel's end Bigger Thomas has changed from a brutal rapist and murderer to someone who ultimately sees others as human beings like himself. Perhaps this transcendent insight is the "faint, wry" part of Bigger's final "bitter smile" (392), a smile that can now find a face within the human form that confronts him.

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